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Cruise Destinations and Itineraries: An Analysis of Cruise Executives' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: The research focuses on the process and criteria utilised by cruise executives for ship deployment and itinerary development. A Summative Content analysis approach is applied on 63 interviews of 89 cruise executives between 2005 and 2018 sourced from commercial press. The results of the analysis indicate that cruise lines focus on yield maximisation through a stepwise process that starts with the evaluation of cruise demand for an area, followed by an analysis of the region(s) and is completed with the selection of the home port(s) and ports of calls. The process is continuously revised based on actual demand, yield results and guest feedback. Moreover, the research provides an organisation of the parameters identified as important decision drivers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Cruise activity in terms of passenger sourcing and ship deployment is concentrated in North America-Caribbean and Europe-Mediterranean.. The largest ship deployment area is the Caribbean and the Mediterranean follows at second place. These two areas attract around half (49%) of the cruise fleet capacity in terms of lower berth days (CLIA, 2019). The North America is the largest source market with 50% of cruise passengers, while Europe accounts for 24%. Thus N. America and Europe account for around three-quarters of cruisers (CLIA, 2019). Caribbean is close to the N. America source market and the Mediterranean to the European passenger markets, which indicates that proximity to the source markets is related to ship deployment.

In 2018 the global cruise industry reached 28.5mil passengers compared to 17.8mil in 2009, which translates to a 27.5% growth (CLIA, 2019). Nevertheless, the cruise industry is still a small market within the tourism industry. The relative small size of the market and the high capital investment for ship acquisition have led to increased market concentration as some cruise lines were not able to follow the investment race in larger cruise ships that emerged between 1995-2005 (Dickinson and Vladimir, 2008). This led to consolidation and the market today is dominated by five groups (CCL, RCL, NCL, MSC, TUI) that operate through 18 brands controlling over 77% of the supply in lower berths (Soriani et al., 2009). Investment in ever larger cruise ships remains strong (Pinnock, 2014). Between 2008 and 2015, the number of ships increased by 3% while capacity in lower berths increased by 27% (Medcruise, 2016). The increased market concentration means that a small number of companies decide on ship deployment and cruise destinations. It also means that destination development is dependent on a limited pool of decision makers.

As the average ship capacity increases, the number of cruise visitors per call also increases. This often leads to congestion on the shore side and puts pressure on port Authorities and operators to expand the terminal facilities and berth capacity. There is also a relationship between infrastructure investment and politics (Ghosh and Meagher, 2015; Henisz, 2002). In the case of cruise investments, policymakers support and often push for cruise port expansion under the assumption that construction of a cruise terminal will generate cruise traffic and boost the regional economy. Thus political pressure is exercised on port authorities to invest in cruise capacity and incentives are offered in the form of State co-financing.

Albeit the political priorities and the market imperatives due to ship size evolution, demand for port services by cruise lines is highly seasonal and cyclical. Seasonality, inherent in the tourism-related activities, leads to lower ROI for the port compared to alternative investments in cargo terminals that indicate more stable demand. Cyclicality refers to ship relocations due to shifts in cruise demand patterns or market developments. Cyclicality, coupled with the market concentration on the side of cruise lines increases the risk of port investment. The relocation of even one ship or cruise line, significantly reduces port capacity utilisation and anticipated revenue. As a consequence, the economic evaluation of cruise port investments is undertaken in a context of high uncertainty. With this in mind, the identification of the drivers of ship deployment and itinerary development, which affect demand for a cruise berth or terminal is equally important to both port authorities and policy decision-makers.

Nevertheless, the process of cruise ship deployment, itinerary development and homeport selection are not adequately addressed in the literature (Sun et. al., 2011; Greenwood et. al, 2006). Ship deployment refers to the choice of geographic region that a cruise ship will sail. Itinerary development is a subsequent step and deals with the port rotation within a cruise product offering. As the port rotation process unfolds, a key role is reserved for the homeport, which is the starting or ending port along a cruise itinerary. The relevant literature does not adequately address the relationship between ship deployment and itinerary development or between the availability of homeport services and ship deployment.

Furthermore, although there is a growing literature on home port selection criteria (Ma et.al, 2015; Bayazit et.al 2015; Jordan, 2013; Lekakou et.al. 2009), research focuses on the views of port authorities, port agents and tourism stakeholders. These groups though are the end receivers of the cruise lines' decision-making process rather than the decision-makers. Thus existing research indicates a noticeable gap and additional research is required on the process of deployment, itinerary and homeport selection.

The current paper focuses on the process and key drivers that cruise executives apply when deciding deployment and port selection, including the choice of homeports. The research is based on a content analysis of 63 press clipping from the specialised trade literature containing interviews of cruise line executives between 2005 to 2018. Its main contribution lies in the identification of the key drivers of ship deployment, port selection and itinerary structure as those are identified and described by the decision-makers of cruise lines. The research also provides an organisation of the process and of the key drivers of decision making creating ground for future research.

The paper is organised into four sections. The first section focuses on the literature regarding the factors affecting cruise itinerary and ship deployment. The second section presents the methodology of the content analysis. The fourth section presents the findings through categorization and a synthesis of the analysis and coding. A discussion of the results concludes the paper.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Literature Overview*

Cruise literature deals with several aspects of the industry (Papathanassis and Beckmann, 2011). However, literature on ship deployment, itinerary planning and port selection is not very extensive. There is an imbalance of research intensity on those three constituents. Existing literature focuses either on the competitive characteristics of a homeport or the key drivers of itinerary planning of luxury cruises. Literature on Ship Deployment seems void and is an unexplored field (Table 1). Primary data is commonly sourced through questionnaires and in cases of secondary data by port traffic statistics (Esteve-Perez and Garcia-Sanchez, 2014) or cruise bookings (Hersh and Ladany, 1989).

Table 1. Literature on cruise deployment, itinerary and homeport selection

REFERENCE	FOCUS	METHOD	Data/Study Group
Wang et al. (2014)	Cruise port success	Questionnaire	Passengers
Martilla (1998)	Cruise port success	Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP)	Passengers
Teye and Leclerc (2003)	Cruise port success	Interviews	Passengers and stakeholders
Marti (1989)	Cruise port success	Content analysis	Passengers
Chen (2002)	Cruise port success	DEA	Ports
Estava Parra and Garcia Sanchez (2014)	Cruise port success	GIS Regression	Mediterranean cruise ports
Lekakou et al. (2009)	Homeport	Questionnaire	Cruise passengers
Brida et al. (2015)	Homeport	Questionnaire	Passengers
Jordan (2013)	Homeport	Questionnaire	Cruise passengers
Wu et al. (2015)	Homeport	Questionnaire / Conceptual	Ports
Rodrigue and Notteboom (2013)	Itinerary development	Conceptual	Cruise industry
Brunnow and Herron (2006)	Luxury cruise itinerary development	Regression sampling / Telephone interviews	Cruise passengers
March and Lindsay (1988)	Luxury cruise itinerary development	Binomial Regression	Cruise passengers

The majority of the literature with primary data draws input from the shore side of the cruise product. Cruise ports, cruise and ship agents and other local stakeholders are the primary source of data. This group of stakeholders and shoreside service providers offer useful insight as to the cruise lines' requirements upon visiting a cruise port. It also features a broader perspective through dealings with many if not all, cruise lines. Therefore, research based on the views of this group is beneficial as confirmatory research. For the same reasons, however, this particular target group lacks insight on the cruise lines' priorities prior to demand materialisation. Cruise ports and cruise agents deal with the aftermath of the cruise ship deployment and itinerary development process. From this perspective, it is necessary to complement the existing literature with input from the cruise lines with the aim to identify the process and drivers of ship deployment, itinerary and homeport selection.

From a methodological perspective, research on homeport selection, within the above constraints, is exclusively based on primary data from questionnaires. Research on Port of Call selection indicates a more diverse approach with the use of both primary and secondary data and the application of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Port of call selection process allows the application of purely quantitative approaches with the use of historical traffic data. This difference in research approaches, probably stems from the difference in scope of a homeport and a port of call. A port of call is necessary within an itinerary and its success is directly connected with passenger traffic and cruise ship calls. This is not equally applicable on the topic of homeport selection. A homeport needs to offer an array of services and their availability is not directly connected with port traffic. The availability of specific services for ship and passengers offer the prospect of homeporting, not its success which is a more complicated process. Therefore, research on homeport selection criteria utilises primary data collection methods such as questionnaires in order to identify the quality and intangible service requirements. The adopted methodology seems to depend on whether the focus is confirmatory or exploratory, with the latter focusing primarily on qualitative research designs.

2.2 *Literature on Ship deployment*

To the best of our efforts, we could not identify any published research on the deployment decision of cruise lines. In research papers the ship deployment decision is ignored and focus is given to the subsequent steps of the cruise product development. Nevertheless, ship deployment deserves research as port choice criteria and itinerary planning are subsequent stages in the development of the cruise product. Port choice and itineraries are not relevant without ships in the region. This was very evident with the recent collapse of the cruise offerings in the Levant Mediterranean area due to the Arab Spring (Karlis & Polemis, 2018). We assume that the lack of research focus is data unavailability. Ship deployment is a strategic decision based on marketing intelligence not easily accessible by researchers. Also the decision process engages several management levels and departments that inhibits data collection. From this perspective, the current research places a first building stone as it presents various aspects of the deployment decision process.

2.3 *Literature on Itinerary planning*

Once the deployment decision is taken the itinerary planning process begins. The itinerary is a critical component of the cruise product impacting costs and revenues. When the itinerary is decided, cruise product costs are considered fixed (Bull, 1996). With a high percentage of fixed costs, the occupancy rate of the ship will determine profitability (Lee & Ramdeen, 2013). Occupancy rate is partially dependent on guest satisfaction (Sun et.al, 2011) which, to a large degree is related to the itinerary. As a result, the itinerary planning process is critical both for the financial success of the cruise and for cruise traffic at cruise destinations.

However, cruise ships are more than a means to an itinerary. The cruise product today is a combination of the ship as a destination (Dowling, 2006, Erkoc et al. 2005) and the calling ports along the way (Esteve-Perez and Garcia-Sanchez, 2014). Some passengers will view the ship as the destination, while others make their choice based on the destinations along the itinerary (Buhalis, 2000). Consequently, the itinerary is of paramount importance being inextricably connected with cruise revenue and profitability and with the port's revenue.

Existing literature focuses either on ship scheduling - routing or the parameters affecting the choice of port calls along the route. The ship's scheduling depends on the geographic - spatial characteristics of the deployment area and the technical specifications of the ship under the limitation of cruise length. The optimal ship scheduling is a ballance of time of departure, cruise length, desired number of ports of call and ultimately the cruise fare, which is related to the demand for the itinerary (Hersh and Ladany, 1989). Marti (1990) confirms these parameters and expands on the cruise length aspect by identifying vessel's operating speed, homeport location, voyage duration and the spatial distribution of destination ports.

The ports of call depend on the attractiveness of the destinations that has two aspects. The first relates to the prospective demand for the cruise when a landmark or a monument of historical importance (Marti, 1990) is included. The second relates to the logistics features of the port such as infrastructure, superstructure and inland connections (Marti, 1990; McCalla, 1998; Gui and Russo, 2011). These logistics features also determine the type of cruise traffic a port is most likely to attract as home and mixed ports tend to promote infrastructure characteristics while ports of call focus on location attractiveness.

In the luxury cruise sector, cruise infrastructure is less important, and there is a greater emphasis on the exotic features and diversity of destinations. Luxury cruise ships also plan port calls with the aim to avoid people congestion from large cruise ships (Greenwood and Barron, 2006). Furthermore, as the clientele base is thinner, luxury cruise companies face pressure to renew their port offerings more often and thus port calls and itineraries are more mutable.

With the above in mind, the literature is broadly in consensus on the parameters affecting cruise itinerary planning. These fall within two broad areas: Marine Logistics (infrastructure, superstructure and location) and destination attractiveness, which includes a large number of tangible as well as intangible elements such as guest satisfaction. The plethora of the parameters identified in the literature creates the obvious question of their comparative ranking. Research on comparative ranking is minimal and case-specific. Thus Wang et.al. (2014) focuses on East Asia. The most important factor was found to be "tourism attractions". "Connectivity and agility" that regards accessibility to the port's hinterland and attractions, as well as the ease of customs formalities, were ranked second and third respectively. Chen (2016) focuses on Taiwan and its prospects as a niche cruise industry and uses 6 clusters of parameters encompassing 41 components in total. The Cluster "Make special trip plans," which focuses on shore excursions and showcasing the local culture was ranked first.

2.4 *Parameters relating to home port selection*

The cruise itinerary requires a homeport. A homeport is the origin or concluding node of the cruise itinerary. Most ports with suitable infrastructure aim to attract homeport operations that allow for a higher profit margin and also have a higher economic impact on the local economies (Castillo-Manzano et.al., 2015; Brida and Zapata, 2010; Gibson and Bentley, 2007).

Lekakou, et.al (2009) explored the factors affecting home port selection focusing on the Greek cruise industry. The key factors identified as important for a home port selection regard (1) outstanding port services and an equally appealing city; (2) modern and efficient airport with substantial airlift; (3) attractive tourist destinations and itineraries; (4) a large population centre; and (5) accessibility to that centre. Bayazit, et.al (2015) examined 62 attributes relating to homeport selection through a questionnaire and ranked the parameters through a Likert scale. Their analysis identified as top decision factors: (1) the cost of port services, (2) port services to ships, (3) port infrastructure, (4) intermodal connections, (5) city facilities and (6) destination attractiveness. Based on the identified factors, it seems that most of the requirements for a homeport focus primarily on the ship, rather than on the passengers. The most important parameter was found the "cost of port services" which was ranked in sixth place by Lekakou, et.al (2009).

Jordan (2013), utilised questionnaires examining the prospects of Trinidad and Tobago to act as a cruise homeport. Therefore, this research does not identify parameters affecting homeport choice but rather evaluates the existence of success factors for the specific port. The critical identified factors include (1) port services/facilities, (2) Tourism product/service/infrastructure, (3) destination infrastructure and (4) political conditions/regulatory framework. Finaly, Ma, et.al., (2015) focusing on 9 Chinese ports evaluated 7 groups of 44 factors and designed an index system.

3 METHODOLOGY

Content analysis deals with the analysis of a broad range of texts (Macnamara, 2005). Patton (2002,p. 453) defines context analysis "as any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings."

Content analysis can be both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach usually entails random sampling techniques with the aim of validity of statistical inferences and is usually deductive in nature. The qualitative approach focuses on purposively chosen texts and is inductive, aiming to identify a construct or concept (Wildemuth, 2016, p.319).

There are three approaches to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Conventional Context Analysis, where categories are derived from the raw data and is appropriate when existing theory or literature is limited. Directed Context Analysis where coding is based on existing literature or theory. This is considered more appropriate for validation or conceptual extension of an existing theoretical framework. The Summative Content analysis focuses on underlying meanings of the words or content. This approach starts with quantifying words or content in text aiming to explore usage rather than meaning. From this quantitative start, the analysis is extended to include latent meaning and themes.

As literature is not available for all aspects of the present research, a methodological dilemma was raised. Although content analysis theory proposes the conventional approach when literature is limited, the existence of literature in other aspects of the present research suggests the application of the Directed Context Analysis or Summative Content analysis. The researchers decided to apply the Summative Content analysis approach for all aspects rather than limiting the focus area of the research due to literature limitations. Although, the Summative Content approach starts with counting word frequencies, after this initial step, the focus is on discovering underlying meanings of the words or the content. This approach is common in studies that analyze manuscript types in a particular journal or specific content in textbooks (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Irrespective of the approach, content analysis applies three steps (Bengtsson, 2016). The planning stage sets the aim, data sampling, collection and analysis method. The data collection follows the planning stage and the process concludes with the data analysis stage.

3.1 *Planning and Data collection*

The research aims to explore, organise and analyse the key decision parameters adopted by cruise lines regarding (a) ship deployment, (b) itinerary rotation and (c) ports of call and/or home port selection. To achieve this aim, a number of options were available regarding data collection and focus group.

It was decided to adopt a content analysis on published interviews by cruise executives. Apart from the ease of access to data, the adopted approach allows the collection of many views coming from an array of company sizes and market focus. More importantly, it allows a collection of comparative views within a period of time which supports the analysis of underlying meanings. On the other hand, interviews are screened prior to publishing and lack spontaneity. They might also serve incidental or contemporary priorities of the interviewee, which can lead researchers to under or overvalue findings. This limitation is countered with the collection of data within a time period that helps to eliminate time-specific priorities of the interviewees.

The interviews were sourced by two commercial publications specialised in the cruise industry. Interviews sourced were published between 2005 and 2018 at Cruise Industry News (https://www.cruiseindustrynews.com/cruise-magazine.html) published quarterly and the annual special report of "Itinerary Planning" of the Cruise and Ferry magazine (https://www.cruiseandferry.net/magazines/Cruise-Ferry-Itinerary-Planning). In total 63 pieces were identified with 89 interviewees from 38 cruise companies (Table 2).

3.2 *Data analysis*

The interviews were organised by date, source, article title and quote provider and were broken down into quotes and phrases. There were 430 phrases identified transcribed and broken down into their 43,681 constituent words. Grammatical articles, conjunctions and pronouns were removed.

The analysis started with the calculation of word frequencies. The most frequent words were then examined for synonyms and a consolidation was undertaken. The consolidated words were again ranked by frequency and a code was assigned. The 25 most frequent codes were examined for context within the original phrases. Based on context the codes were expanded to include additional ungrouped words. Thus, for instance, all geographical names and nationalities were grouped into the "Specific Location" code and specific itinerary durations were incorporated into the "Itinerary" code. This process was iterated three times aiming to include as many words as possible into the codes identified based on their contextual use. The process did not expand beyond a third iteration aiming to easily replicated results and avoidance of consolidation based on context, underlying meaning or researchers' biases. On completion 31 codes had been devised and 3,123 words were uncoded (appendix 1 presents the codes and frequencies).

The adopted analysis falls within the quantitative conventional context analysis approach and provides useful findings regarding important elements based on frequency of word use. For instance, "itinerary" is a more frequently used word than "destination". This indicates that rotation and sequence is more important than the actual visited places. However, further analysis was applied based on the research's exploratory aim. The codes derived from the quantitative analysis were utilised to locate the phrases that contained the most frequent words. One of the authors undertook the identification of the relevant phrases coding to achieve consistency. This round of coding was based on contextual meaning and key focus points of the phrase(s). Upon completion, the second author received the initial coding and commented as necessary. When in agreement that a phrase had more than one underlying meaning, a second code was assigned (Appendix 2 provides contextual coding results).

Table 2. Cruise Lines and Interviewees included in data

AIDA CRUISES	**Dream Cruises**	**RCCL, AZAMARA, Celebrity**
Burkhard Mueller	Thatcher Brown	Chris Allen
Gerhard Lubren	**Fred Olsen**	**Regent Seven Seas**
Azamara Cruises	Martin Lister	Mike Pawlus
Claudius Docekal	**Holland America**	**Saga Cruises**
Michael Pawlus	Bruce Krumrine	James Langley
Mike Pawlus	Dirk van der Raadt	**Salamis Cruises**
Carnival China	Linda Springmann	Kikis A. Vassiliou
Mario Zanetti	Paul Goodwin	**Seabourn**
CARNIVAL UK	Simon Douwes	Timothy Littley
David Dingle	Tom Anderson	**SeaDream Yacht Club**
CCL	**MSC**	James Cabello
Alan Buckelew	Achille Staiano	**Silversea cruises**
David Bernstein	Gianluca Suprani	Captain Guido Mazzetti
Fred Stein	Gianni Onorato	Elisabetta de Nardo
Gerard Tempest	Neil Palomba	Expanding the brand
Giora Israel	Pierfrancesco Vago	Lisa McAuley
Michel Nestour	**Norwegian Cruise Line**	**Star Cruises**
Roberto Martinoli	Crane Gladding	William Ng
Terry Thornton	Frank del Rio	**Thomson Cruises**
Ugo Savino	Kevin Sheehan	Helen Caron
CCL AUSTRALIA	William Hamlin	**TUI CRUISES**
Ann Sherry	**P&O Cruises**	Marcus Puttich
Sean Dudley	Carol Marlow	Richard Vogel
Celebrity Cruises	Chris Gale	Tine Oelmann
Jamie Haller	Jan Heylen	**VIKING CRUISES**
Michael Bayley	**Paul Gauguin Cruises**	Matt Grimes
Celestyal Cruises	Oscar Abello	**VSHIPS LEISURE**
Kerry Anastassiadis	**Ponant**	Lorenzo Malvarosa
Vassilios Gazikas	German Amaya	**Windstar**
COSTA CROCIERE	**Princess Cruises**	Sander Groothius
Franco Porcellacchia	Anthony Kaufman	Susan Salvin
Harald von der Osten-Sac	Crystal Morgan	**Windstar Cruises**
Massimo Brancaleoni	Deanna Austin	Jess Peterson
Crystal	**PULLMANTUR**	
Anita Hodson	Marin Martinton	
Anita Jane Hodson	**RCCL**	
Joe Valenti	Adam Goldstein	
John Stoll	Anonymous	
Scott Kibota	Captain William Wright	
Cunard lines	Chris Allen	
Josh Liebowitz	Diana Block	
Diamond Cruises	Jason Liberty	
Jian Liu	John Tercek	
Disney Cruises	Lisa Lutoff Perlo	
Paul Britton	Marc Miller	
Russell S Daya	Miguel Reyna	
Steve Masters	Richard Fain	

4 RESULTS

4.1 *The Ship Deployment Decision*

The deployment decision starts with a safety evaluation. This includes climate conditions, social aspects and geopolitics. Safety and Security are critical.

It is easy to divert ships from a risk region and very hard to attract them back. Such an effort requires successfully addressing the initial safety/security concern and communicating the outcome to cruise lines and, more importantly, to potential cruisers.

The primary driver of the deployment decision is yield maximisation "We deploy ships where we can expect the highest yield" (Simon Douwes, 2010). This is consistent with literature (Lee and Ramdeen, 2012; Hersh and Ladany, 1989). Yield is dependent on price, volume and cruise season length. Although a cruise ship can be deployed in a number of places and successfully fill capacity, the cruise operator will choose from the available options the one where guests are willing to pay the highest price. The yield, is monitored carefully from the advertisement of the cruise and the speed of bookings ahead of sailing, is used as indication of the success of cruise offering.

On the price side of the equation, apart from the actual price of the ticket cruise lines focus on auxiliary sales potential that includes onboard purchases and bookings for excursions. Therefore attractive destinations with landmarks or renowned points of interest that guests want to visit are always on the radar of cruise companies.

The length of the cruise season also affects the yield. Alaska indicates a relatively shorter season compared to the Caribbean for instance. This means that even if bookings are the same, guests should be willing to pay higher rates in order for Alaska to yield equally. If the rate achieved by the cruise line is not at equitable to an alternative deployment area then the ship will be relocated.

The optimization of revenue potential and the deployment decision are also related to the fleet and ship characteristics, as Chris Allan (2016) stated: " When we look at the formula, it is to maximize the profitability of each individual ship and the fleet in total – to find the best deployment for each class of ship – taking the revenue into account, what guests are willing to pay for each cruise, onboard revenue, tour revenue – and the key variable expenses associated with an itinerary, such as fuel." In addition, not all ships are suitable for deployment in all areas. Thus optimisation is aimed at fleet andt ship level. Fleet size creates an obvious limitation on two aspects. Firstly, even the largest cruise lines need to choose where the capacity will be deployed. The second aspect was highlighted by Dirk Van Der Raadt (2017) "With a fleet of fourteen ships, itinerary planning still comes down to making careful choices about where the vessels go".

The later point relates to market analysis. As ships get bigger the deployment exercise changes. Although the trend for larger ships is apparent, a mix of ship sizes in the fleet provides market analysis advantage. Assigning a large iconic ship in an unproved area based only on preliminary research can prove a costly decision. A smaller ship can be used as "pathfinder" for a new area or itinerary. If the revenue data is positive the capacity offered is gradually build up. As Chris Allen (2015) noted "It is the first time, we have deployed a ship of that size for a full season outside the Caribbean. We learned a lot from the Oasis last year, which had a very successful micro season". Therefore, the process of maturity of a deployment area is long. From this perspective growth of average vessel size deployed by each company provides a better indication of the prospects of a destination. This can be particularly useful to destinations and policymakers alike during the evaluation of port investments and cruise prospects.

With the above in mind, the question is how cruise lines choose the deployment area from the available options. The analysis indicates that two factors are of primary importance: Yield prospects and Marketability. Yield is evaluated based on past performance data. Ship and itinerary performance is continuously monitored and the data from previous cruise offerings are revisited during deployment evaluation. This means that opening up new areas or itineraries is not an easy task due to lack of yield data. Therefore, destinations that aspire to be included in cruise offerings need to commit with a long term strategy.

The second consideration regards the appeal of an area to the source markets. Chris Allen (2015) put it eloquently "We go where our guests want to go." If an area is appealing to the source markets and demand is positive, then marketability is easier and yields are better. The latter is reinforced by Scott Kibota (2007) "We go where the yield is, which also happens to be where the passengers want to go". From the cruise line's view a destination should be both well-known as well as attractive enough so that guests are willing to pay the necessary rate for the visit. Therefore, cruise lines will adapt their deployment according to the demand trend. As trends and passenger tastes change, so will deployment and destinations. This, however, also means that destination volumes will also change over time, which makes cruise port investment evaluation more challenging and with more extended payback periods.

There are cases where destinations aiming to improve the yield for cruise lines offer financial incentives (Mathisen, 2018; CIN, 2014). These incentives take the form of discount on port handling fees and/or port dues or direct payment to cruise lines per passenger. This practice impacts on the profitability of a cruise (discounts) or on the yield (direct payment). The effectiveness of such initiatives to attract cruise traffic in the long term, has not been studied in the literature and deserves analysis as they impact port competition and port investment appraisal and also have a socio-economic aspect related to allocation of resources.

4.2 *The Itinerary Decision*

Once the area of deployment is decided, cruise lines fill in the itinerary, as Douwes (2016) highlighted "First, we put the deployment together, which is the general area the ship will sail during the year. Once we have that, we go in and fill the itinerary". The objective is to create commercially appealing itineraries. The selling point of a cruise is still the destination and itinerary, although many Lines increasingly promote the ship as destination. Therefore the itinerary compilation is a key driver of yield.

There are two parameters that affect actual itinerary: brand image and passenger mix. When the itinerary is put together, the brand focus of the Line is a key determinant. Each cruise line portrays a specific image (Table 3). The adopted image directs focus on specific source market sections. By return the cruise line's itineraries adapt to the needs of the market section under focus.

Table 3. Brand focus of Cruise Lines. Source: Authors' compilation

Interviewee	Line	Quote
Joe Valenti	Crystal Cruises	"We are in the business of trying to put together unique itineraries – going to unusual places…"
Helen Caron	Thomson Cruises	"Thomson Discovery will be a fantastic addition… The newest addition is larger than the others in our fleet, however, it still fits with our strategy of operating smaller ships with must-do itineraries…"
Susan Salvin	Windstar Cruises	"Windstar is known for smaller harbours where other ships cannot go…"
Simon Douwes	HAL	"As we promote HAL as a destination-driven cruise line, we can't simply offer the same itineraries every year…"
Lisa McAuley	Silversea cruises	"Silversea offers destination-focused itineraries, we call into many new and lesser visited ports so it is vital that the areas we visit offer a genuine and immersive travel experience for our guests."
Michael Pawlus	Azamara Cruises	"Our guests are curious explorers, so we always consider a destination's potential for providing inspiring Land Discoveries excursions."
Achille Staiano	MSC	"Our motto 'think local, act local', is key."
Paul Britton	Disney Cruises	"At Disney, we always try to describe ourselves as storytellers. We try to make an itinerary that flows…"

The mix of passengers play a key role in the destination mix. Cruise passengers comprise two groups "experienced" and "first-timers". As Jamie Haller (2005) stated "We basically balance marquee ports and new ports largely in proportion to new and past guests. Thus, we are always hunting for new destinations". Therefore cruise lines aim for a mix of destinations with marquee ports that attract first-timers and new destinations that will revitalise the interest of past passengers. The higher the rate of repeat guests the higher the necessity to renew itinerary more often. The new larger cruise ships offer the possibility to include new onboard activities. They also allow to renew itineraries focusing on the new amenities, thus partially relieving the pressure to constantly include new destinations in successful itineraries.

Cruise duration affects itinerary development. The length of the cruise creates limitations on the number of port calls. Cruise lines adopt different strategies. The typical duration depends on the deployment area that affects distance between destinations. Although a seven-day cruise seems to be the norm some Lines focus on nine-days or on short two to three days trips. Luxury brands increasingly offer short cruises that are appealing to the so-called working rich, but also serves to lower the price, making the product affordable to more people, which in turn increase yield. Short cruises are also suitable to introduce cruising to new guests who make a first attempt on this type of vacation.

The balance between sail time and port calls within the itinerary plays a key role. The challenge is to balance the needs of experienced cruisers with newcomers. Past cruisers prefer more sailing time to enjoy the ship's amenities and events. Newcomers usually book for the destinations and thus pay particular attention to the ports and number of calls. Jamie Haller (2005) noted "Experienced cruisers tend to appreciate longer sailings with more sea-days, while first timers are attracted more by shorter cruises and by well-known names. They need to see destinations that they recognize".

4.3 *The Ports of Call Selection*

Port evaluation and selection includes a "safety" evaluation, which is now port specific, as opposed to the evaluation of the safety characteristics of the area. Safety is evaluated from two perspectives: The vessel perspective and the human perspective, both passengers and crew.

4.3.1 *Homeport selection*

Every itinerary is dependent on a homeport. Ideally, a homeport would also be a "marquee" port that will act as important attraction along the cruise itinerary. Examples are Venice, Piraeus (Athens), Civitavecchia (Rome). However, this is not the main requirement. A homeport mainly serves two primary functions. The first is to facilitate a smooth and fast embarkation or disembarkation of guests. For this it requires infrastructure such as passenger terminals, baggage handling and X-Ray scanning facilities, check-in and waiting areas, parking spaces, airlift capacity etc. As Marc Miller (2016) put it "The port infrastructure will only become more important in coming years. When you look at the orderbook – almost everything is big ships, and I think that trend will continue, and the ports will have a challenge trying to accommodate them. Today your average ship size is at least 4,000 guests".

The second primary function is to be the "home" for the ship. The port must provide auxiliary services to ship not normally expected by a port of call. Richard Vogel (2014, p. 20) notes: "Ports need to recognise that, if they want to become turnaround ports, there is more they need to do than just provide a pier – it is all the ancillary services that we need, too." Such services are the availability and loading of supplies, water, bunkers, slop reception facilities, the possibility for small repairs etc. Port auxiliary services are usually available at ports with large volumes and multiple functions. This means that cruise lines need to compete with other port users for port space, berth availability and timely service provision, which renders port congestion a growing challenge for cruise lines.

The key element of a homeport is its location. Location is so important that can sometimes outweigh efficiency, as emphasized by William NG (2014) "To be profitable, a ship needs to homeport in a place with a sustainable source market". The availability of facilities and auxiliary services are necessary for a homeport function but location is the primary concern. Services can be gradually built up, location is fixed. Two points are raised by Thorton (2014) " Because of the size of our ships, the infrastructure has to be a certain size to give a good experience, but if we could find attractive places closer together, we would be interested".

An ideal location is a relative concept based on two aspects. First of all, a homeport's ideal location is at driving distance from the source markets. Long distance between a homeport and a source market impacts negatively on the cost of the cruise ticket as it adds the airlift costs. Fred Stein (2018) notes: "With our deployment all around North America, we are also committed to offering interesting itineraries in a shorter time frame that do not require a flight". Close proximity of the homeport to the source market allows easy access to travelers and reduces the cost of the trip. The reduction of the trip cost grows the prospective source market and provides possibilities for larger yields for the cruise line. Stein (2018) stated, "Two-thirds of our guests drive to the port, and half the population of North America lives within a five-hour drive of one of our ports". Therefore, cruise lines tend to choose homeports at close proximity to their main source markets or have multiple homeports to capture as much of the market as possible.

The second aspect of homeport location deals with sailing distances of the itinerary. The itinerary needs to have attractive destinations and the distance among these affect sailing periods and fuel costs. Captain William Wright (2005) stated "We are trying to match the ships and the itineraries as well as minimizing the nautical miles". Fuel costs are a key constituent of itinerary planning and cruise lines have limited options. The introduction of ECAs put additional pressure on the Cruise lines. Operators aim at reducing sailing distances within the itinerary which however depends on the topography of the area. From this perspective, archipelagic areas such as the Aegean are very attractive. Alternatively, Lines can cut sailing speed which leads to fewer calling ports or increased pressure for faster turnaround services in order to sail out earlier. Thorton (2011) noted "We are looking at ways to reduce fuel costs, everything from slowing ships down to changing ports. We have even experimented with taking ports out". Promoting the ship as destination supports fuel consumption as it allows to create itineraries with fewer destinations.

4.3.2 *Ports of Call*

A home port is mostly focused on the vessel while a port of call primarily focuses on the passengers. The primary function of a port of call is to enhance the experience of cruisers, as emphasized by Linda Springmann (2016) "But until we've actually visited the new port or sailed a new itinerary, we can't fully recognise the results from a guest satisfaction standpoint, which is equally as important as the sales figures". Successful fulfilment of this function requires access to attractions or renowned events. Efficiency in services is also crucial.

Interestingly, the destinations within the itinerary are not independent. The guest feedback for each port call is equally important with the overall experience of the trip. To some extent, the itinerary acts as links in a chain. The cruise trip is as successful as its weakest link, as stated by Jess Peterson (2018) "One port can make the difference between a profitable cruise and a cruise where we lose money". Thus, cooperation among destinations in an area aiming to improved overall experience is necessary and is strongly supported by cruise lines.

Excursions are a very important revenue stream for cruise lines. Excursion income is measured against call cost. The result between revenue and port call cost needs to be positive for all ports in the string. Simon Douwes (2014) noted "The shore excursion revenue is a very important aspect for us, many ports in the world have port costs higher than the shore excursion income, and those calls costs us money. That is not the case in Canada/New England, but in some ports here it is almost a zero sum". The more options available the more the excursions that can be offered and the more tempting for passengers to choose one. This is important for port marketers and destination managers as it indicates that port tariff policy should have a different approach than cost pricing or demand elasticity, according to Crystal Morgan (2014) "The perfect port has low costs and generates high revenue".

However, the more attractive points of interest in a port of call, the more ships and passengers it attracts. This can lead to "people pollution" that diminishes passenger experience and ultimately reduces demand for the itinerary and the port, as noted by Peterson (2018) "The thing I worry about more is port congestion" and "We will change itineraries if there is a better guest experience". This is the reason why "people's pollution" needs to be addressed early by the local Authorities with careful management of shore-side facilities. Such measures usually impose quotas or maximum numbers of ships and/or visitors. Despite the short-term loss, the long-term risk from reduced visitors' satisfaction is greater. This is especially true as cruise Lines always record the experience of passengers upon their return from the port of call. If the average number of comments is negative, the itinerary could change and exclude the port from future calls.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the latter research was twofold. The first was to identify the criteria utilized by cruise executives when deciding deployment and selection of ports. And secondly, to conjugate the relevant process. The research is based on a content analysis of presentations and interviews made by cruise executives, applying the thematic network approach.

Our findings indicate that the whole process is very technical, multidimensional and monitored continuously by the cruise line's analysts for immediate adjustments. On that aspect, two factors seem to be of primary importance: Yield prospects and Marketability.

The maximization of yield begins with a safety evaluation of relevant aspects such as climate, social and geopolitical issues of the area. Vital role in the profitability rates apart from the actual ticket price is the auxiliary sales potential that can occur onboard or from booking excursions under the cruise season's length. Moreover, it was identified that cruise companies take advantage of their smaller vessels as pathfinders for new regions or itineraries.

To achieve high yields, the appeal of a particular area is of utmost significance. Therefore, cruise lines try to identify destinations that are well known and attractive, so potential customers are willing to pay the required rate to visit. Thus, cruise itinerary is of major importance, and two parameters define it: brand image and passenger mix.

The cruise planning deployment process would have been incomplete if there was no port of call evaluation and selection. Our findings indicate that the primary concern is safety. The latter refers to the safety of the vessel and the safety of both passengers and crew. The criteria, though, for selection of a port of call and homeport are significantly different.

On the other hand, the requirements for the ports of call tend to focus on the passengers and their ability to enhance the cruisers' experience. The number and variety of excursions offered may tempt more passengers to choose one, generating a significant revenue stream for the cruise lines. The latter finding is essential to port marketers and destination managers, indicating that an alternative port tariff policy may be more appropriate than the existing one, heavily dependent upon cost prising and demand elasticity.

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